DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 470 418 CG 032 047

AUTHOR	Shechtman, Zipora
TITLE	Aggression and Classroom Climate: Relations and Applications.
PUB DATE	2002-08-00
NOTE	26p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Psychological Association (110th, Chicago, IL, August 22-25, 2002).
PUB TYPE	Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS
DESCRIPTORS	*Aggression; Behavior Problems; *Classroom Environment; Coping; Foreign Countries; Intermediate Grades; *Peer Relationship; *Predictor Variables; Social Environment; Student Behavior; *Teacher Student Relationship
IDENTIFIERS	Israel

ABSTRACT

One of the best predictors of aggression among schoolchildren is their social environment and relationships with peer and teachers. This study investigated the association between classroom climate and level of classroom aggression. The study population comprised over 9,000 fifth and sixth graders in 97 schools and 360 classrooms in Israel. It was hypothesized that a positive climate, including the dimensions of Relationships, Personal Development and System Maintenance, would relate negatively to aggression in the class and positively to teacher coping with such aggression. Results of the hierarchical regression indicated that aggression was negatively related to Relationships and Personal Development, but not to System Maintenance. All three climate dimensions were positively related to teacher coping. A positive relation was also found between aggression and low SES, boys, and younger children. The discussion stresses the importance of developing positive relationships in the classroom, particularly in regard to milder forms of aggression. (Contains 48 references and 2 tables.) (Author/GCP)

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Aggression and Classroom Climate: Relations and Applications

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Abstract

One of the best predictors of aggression among schoolchildren is their social environment and relationships with peers and teachers. This study investigated the association between classroom climate and level of classroom aggression. The study population comprised over 9,000 fifth and sixth graders in 97 schools and 360 classrooms in Israel. It was hypothesized that a positive climate, including the dimensions of Relationships, Personal Development and System Maintenance, would relate negatively to aggression in the class and positively to teacher coping with such aggression. Results of the hierarchical regression indicated that aggression was negatively related to Relationships and Personal Development, but not to System Maintenance. All three climate dimensions were positively related to teacher coping. A positive relation was also found between aggression and low SES, boys, and younger children. The discussion stresses the importance of developing positive relationships in the classroom, particularly in regard to milder forms of aggression.

Aggression and Classroom Climate: Relations and Applications

Contemporary school settings can become battle zones, and the safety of teachers and students is not always assured (Nims, 2000). Whether violence in schools is increasing to epidemic proportions (Flannery, 1997) or decreasing (NCES, 1998), it remains a problem. This issue remains on the agenda for two important reasons. First, the definition of violence in the school has been expanded to include bullying, threats and fights (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001), and indeed most of the violence found in schools is of this type (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999). Second, society is more aware of its consequences (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997); frequent victimization can disrupt the course of development and is associated with symptomatology over the course of the life span (Terr, 1991), including withdrawal, antisocial behavior, lack of supportive relationships, low academic achievements, low self-esteem, and high risk of future aggression (Furlong, Sharma, & Rhee, 2000).

The etiology of aggression includes multiple sources, including the family, personal characteristics and social characteristics (Flannery, 1997; Laub & Lauritsen, 1998; Sandhu, Underwood & Sandhu, 2000). Although parents play an extremely important role in affecting the child's level of aggression, they are not easily influenced by school policies. On the other hand, youth violence has a heavy social component, and it is possible to address social factors in school.

Research shows that young perpetrators seem to lack significant positive involvement or engagement with peers or adults. Social withdrawal and excessive feelings of isolation and rejection are common early signs of potentially violent behavior

(Osher & Warger, 1998), and the development of intimate relationships has been found to decrease this risk (Giggans & Levy, 1997).

Social support and clear rules are the most frequent principles mentioned in the literature for the reduction of classroom and school violence (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997; Olweus, 1997; Rigby, 1996; Ross, 1996). A national longitudinal study in the U.S. found perceived school connectedness to be the largest factor that protected youth from violence (Resnick et al., 1997). Jenkins (1997) found commitment to school and consistent enforcement of school rules to be the most important predictors of lower school crime and positive peer influence to be the most significant predictor of decreased violence. Baker (1998) attributed school violence to failure of community in the school and the lack of school affiliation, claiming that children who are unable to share their experiences with schoolmates will likely experience feelings of alienation and rejection, leading to aggressive behavior toward the school, personnel and peers.

In the spirit of these findings, the response to school violence has shifted somewhat from Zero Tolerance to a Well-being approach (Bauer, 2000; Nettles, Muderah, & Jones, 2000; Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). At the individual level, well-being is about happiness and self-fulfillment; at the group level, it is about responsibility, nurturing, altruism and tolerance (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). One of the greatest obstacles to happiness is lack of intimacy, loneliness and alienation (Buss, 2000; Myers, 2000). Accordingly, schools are encouraged to become caring communities in which teachers and students develop empathic relationships (Sandhu et al., 2000) based on listening, caring, sharing and mutual interests (Striepling, 1997). Communities that increase each member's sense of belonging and commitment (Nooman, 1999) and enhance

relationships (Dykeman et al., 1996; Howard, Flora & Griffin, 1999) tend to be characterized by less school violence. In short, research suggests that a key factor in preventing violence is the students' positive relation to their school environment and peers (Myers, 2000; Dwyer, Osher & Warger, 1998).

As the treatment of aggression is more likely to be successful if it is done from an ecological orientation and deals with the child as part of a group (Lerner, 1995), the development of positive relationships can best be addressed in the classroom, which serves as the most significant peer group and in which children spend most of their school time. Indeed, the concept of positive classroom climate has been developed from an ecological perspective (Burden & Fraeser, 1993; Moos, 1987; Raviv, Raviv, & Reise, 1993). Classroom climate encompasses three major dimensions: Relationships (among students and with teacher), Personal Development (the achievement of personal goals with a moderate level of competition) and System Maintenance (order, rules, control and innovations) (Trickett & Moos, 1974). Positive classroom climate has been found to be related to students' self-esteem, sense of belonging, responsibility, achievement (Abel et al., 1998; Lewis, Schaps, & Watson, 1996; Manor, 1987; Raviv et al., 1993) and decreased aggression (Abel et al., 1998; Abrams & Segal, 1998).

This study investigated the relation between classroom climate and aggression among fifth and sixth graders in Israel. It was hypothesized that the level of aggression would be negatively related to a positive classroom climate. More specifically, Relationships, Personal Development and System Maintenance were expected to be negatively related to the level of classroom aggression and positively related to teacher coping with aggression in the classroom.

In addition, based on the literature, several mediating variables (SES, grade level and gender) were predicted to be related to the level of aggression. First, in light of findings that neighborhood conditions, such as poverty, population turnover and crime rates, are the strongest predictors of school violence (Farrington, 1991; Guerra, Huesman, Tolan, VanAcker, & Eron, 1995; Laub & Lauritsen, 1998), we expected to find more aggression in schools with lower SES levels. This is in keeping with an earlier Israeli survey (Benbenishty, Zeira, & Astor, 2000) that found higher aggression rates in low-SES schools. Second, as aggression has been shown to increase with age, reaching a peak in adolescence, children in the upper (sixth) grade were expected to report higher levels of aggression (Benbenishty et al., 2000; Kauffman, 1989). Finally, boys were expected to score higher on aggression (Huesmann & Guerra, 1997; Pollack, 1998; Yogan & Henry, 2000).

Method

Subjects

This study is part of a national evaluation study conducted in Israel to assess a counseling program (Life Skills Training program). This program has been implemented in 520 elementary schools in the country over the past six years. Of these schools, a representative sample of 100 was selected, and up to 4 fifth- and sixth-grade classes from each school were randomly selected. Three schools refused to participate, creating a sample of 97 schools, 360 classrooms and over 9,000 students. SES ranged from 50 to 250, with a higher score representing low SES. The average SES score of this sample was 141, somewhat lower than the average population score (a bit higher SES).

Variables and Measures

Level of Aggression refers to students' perception of the frequency of certain aggressive acts taking place in the classroom, including verbal and physical aggression. Based on questionnaires developed by Furlong and colleagues (1996) to measure school aggression, Benbenishty et al. (2000) developed a Hebrew scale, which was recently used for a national survey of aggression in Israeli schools. For the present study, we adapted the scale to measure classroom aggression. The scale is divided into two parts. The first part contains 16 items dealing with aggressive behavior of various types (e.g., insulting, pushing, using weapons). Children were asked: "Which of the following has happened to you in the past month in your classroom?" Examples include: "A student grabbed/pushed you on purpose"; "A student insulted and humiliated you". Responses are on a three-point scale: never, once or twice, three times or more. Internal consistency was satisfactory (Alpha = .79).

Teacher's Coping with Aggression was tapped by the second part of the same scale. This part contains four items: one assesses the sense of security in the classroom and the other three measure teacher's coping. A sample item is: "Our teacher effectively deals with violent students." Responses are on a five-point scale, from 1 (not at all) to 5 (frequently). Because the first item deviates somewhat from the rest, intercorrelations were calculated. Indeed, this item had low correlations with the others (r = .16-.25); however, the other three correlated higher (r = .34-.45). Internal consistency was moderate (Alpha = .62).

Classroom Climate measures perceived climate from an ecological perspective. The present study used a Hebrew-language abridged version of Moos and Trickett (1987)

Classroom Environment Scale (CES). The original scale contains 90 items, divided into three major dimensions and nine sub-scales: Relationships (Involvement, Affiliation, Teacher Support); Personal Development (Task Orientation, Competition); and System Maintenance (Order, Rule Clarity, Teacher Control, Innovations). Reported internal consistency ranged from .67 to .86, with an average of .80. Intercorrelation coefficients within dimensions ranged from .48 to .52. and were higher than the other dimensions. Test-retest reliability ranged from .72 to .90. Validity was based on comparison with relevant tests.

The shortened version used in this study was comprised of 36 items, 4 per sub-scale. The reported correlation with the full scale was satisfactory (r = .80) (Moos & Trickett, 1987). The Hebrew version of the CES has been used in many studies in Israel (Manor, 1987; Raviv et al., 1993; Shechtman, 1997). The internal consistency of the total scale was satisfactory (.71). Possible responses were Yes(2)/No(1).

Process

The questionnaires were distributed and collected over a period of three months. They were anonymously filled out in the classroom, with two researchers administering them to the students. During this time, the teachers were busy filling out their own questionnaires and were not involved in any way in the process of students' completion of the questionnaire.

Due to the multi-level structure of the data, we used a hierarchical model in which students were nested within classes within schools. The three-level Hierarchical Linear Model (HLM) included the student level (gender), the classroom level (grade level) and the school level (SES). Gender was scored as follows: boys-1, girls-2. Similarly, grade

level was scored 1 for fifth graders and 2 for sixth graders. Finally, SES scores ranged from 50 to 250; the higher the score, the lower the SES.

Results

Descriptive Information

Aggression and coping. Perceived frequencies of aggressive behaviors and of teacher coping are presented in Table 1. The most frequent behavior appears to be cursing, insulting and pushing; the least is the use of a weapon. The correlation between verbal and physical aggression is high ($r = .71$). The mean level of aggression is about average ($M = 1.39$, $SD = .12$; on a 3-point scale) and teacher coping is higher ($M = 3.77$, $SD = .34$; on a 5-point scale). The correlation coefficient between the two is negative and high ($r = -.48$, $p<.001$).

Insert Table 1 about Here

Classroom Climate. Classroom climate scores by sub-scale are presented in Figure 1. Overall, these scores are high, with Competition and Affiliation the highest and Teacher Control and Order the lowest.

Insert Figure 1 about here

Relations With Level of Aggression and Teacher Coping

The relationships between aggression and teacher coping, on the one hand, and classroom climate (all three components), school SES, grade level and gender, on the other, were tested within a Hierarchical Linear Model (Table 2). Results indicated relationships between the level of classroom aggression and two of the CES sub-scales: Relationships and Personal Development. System Maintenance was not found to be related. All three

CES sub-scales (including System Maintenance) were related to teacher coping in the expected direction.

Insert Table 2 about Here

The highest relationships with level of aggression were found for the Relationship dimension of classroom climate and for gender. Both were negatively related to aggression. Hence, the less involvement, affiliation and teacher support reported by students, the higher the reported level of aggression in the classroom. Moreover, boys were more aggressive than girls.

SES was positively related to aggression, suggesting that aggression is higher in low-SES schools (since a higher score represents lower SES). The negative relationship with grade level suggests that fifth graders have higher scores than sixth graders. Interestingly, System Maintenance, which includes variables such as order, clarity of rules and teacher control, was not found to be related to the level of aggression in the classroom.

All three climate dimensions were positively related to teacher coping with aggression, with a particularly high score for Relationships. Gender was also positively related, suggesting that girls perceived teachers as coping better than boys did. Fifth graders reported more teacher coping than sixth graders. Finally, SES was negatively related to teacher coping, suggesting that teachers are coping less effectively with aggression in the low-SES schools.

Discussion

In light of the documented association between positive social conditions and school aggression (Baker, 1998; Goldstein & Conoley, 1997; Jenkins, 1997; Resnick et al.,

1997), this study investigated the relationship between a positive classroom climate and aggression in the classroom. Of the three dimensions comprising a positive classroom climate — Relationships, Personal Development and System Maintenance — only the first two were related to the level of classroom aggression; System Maintenance was not. Relationships and System Maintenance represent contradictory orientations: whereas the former emphasizes belonging, closeness and support, the latter focuses on rules and regulations, order and control. While both are important components in reducing classroom (and school) aggression and violence, and are probably interdependent, educators differ in the emphasis they give to each one. The Zero Tolerance movement consider rules, order and control as the key to maintenance of an educational setting free of violence, whereas the Well-being movement emphasizes relationships based on nurturing, altruism, tolerance and support (Bauer, 2000; Buss, 2000; Dykeman et al., 1996; Howard et al., 1999; Myers, 2000; Nettles et al., 2000; Nooman, 1999; Sandhu et al., 2000).

Results of this study support the Well-being approach, suggesting that it is the relationships among students and with teachers — rather than rules and control — that are related to the level of classroom aggression and to the students' sense of security that the teacher is efficiently coping with aggression. In other words, a sense of belonging, involvement in classroom life, and receipt of support and encouragement are far more important than external control. This is not to suggest that there is no room for rules and control; System Maintenance components seem to increase student trust in the teacher and her/his willingness and ability to take care of them. This is important, as students need to know that they are protected in school and that the significant adults in school

care about them. However, if we want to reduce aggressive behavior, the enhancement of relationships seems to be a more effective strategy. In a climate in which children get to know each other personally, cooperate on tasks and projects, and develop understanding and empathy towards classmates, it makes sense to assume that they would be less likely to hurt one another, verbally or physically. Indeed, a growing body of literature suggests that the Zero Tolerance approach has not proven effective; detectors, harsh discipline and punishment have not effectively reduced aggression, and some even argue that they have increased it (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). On the other hand, a friendly and supportive environment, characterized by close and intimate friendships, has always been valued as a means for enhancing self-esteem and social success (Jenkins, 1997; Myers, 2000; Nettles et al., 2000).

Overall, relationships appear to be quite good in the investigated schools, but teacher control, order and task orientation are much lower. This may reflect the ethos and culture of Israeli schools, which stress the importance of relationships. Teachers are encouraged to develop personal relationships with students, and school counselors invest a considerable effort in classroom interventions aimed to develop relationships. Moreover, the unique Israeli school system may enhance relationships, in that the class is a self-contained social unit to which the same students belong for several successive years and spend most of their school day. The relatively high score in teacher coping may also reflect the ethos of Israeli schools. One of the main roles of the homeroom teacher is to cope with interpersonal problems in the classroom. Our results suggest that this coping role is carried out more by enhancing relationships than via external control.

The level of aggression in Israeli schools has been closely monitored over the last few years (Benbenishty et al., 2000), and preventive interventions have been applied to decrease school aggression. In this respect, the mean score of aggression obtained in the present study is quite encouraging. On a scale of 1-3, a mean score of 1.39 is not very high. However, the relatively low mean score may reflect the infrequency of the harsher forms of violence, which may mask the problem of milder forms of aggression. Verbal aggression and milder physical aggression appear to be frequent in this study, as is also indicated in the literature (Mulvey & Cauffman, 2001). Although not life-threatening, such aggression is still destructive in terms of victimization, with long-term consequences reflected in academic achievements, low self-esteem, withdrawal and antisocial behavior (Furlong et al., 2000; Goldstein & Conoley, 1997; Olweus, 1997; Terr, 1991). Moreover, the high correlation between verbal and physical aggression found in this study suggests that verbal aggression can easily escalate to physical aggression and lead to violent behavior of the worst kind.

The conclusion of this study is congruent with the literature that promotes a proactive approach to reducing school violence. All types of prevention — primary, secondary and tertiary — are needed (Larson, 1998). Primary prevention has been found to reduce school aggression, particularly bullying (Goldstein & Conoley, 1997; Olweus, 1997; Smith & Levan, 1995). Secondary prevention is needed for the treatment of students at high risk of aggressive behavior. Although such programs are still quite rare in schools, those that have been used have proven to be quite effective (Pepler et al., 1995; Shechtman, 2000). Finally, tertiary prevention is needed to address the deviant behavior of aggressors. In addition, educators must learn more about the nature of aggression and

be trained to respond effectively to aggressive provocation: to avoid power struggles, halt escalation of violence, and treat the aggressor with understanding and empathy (Rigby, 1996; Ross, 1996).

It is interesting to consider the relationships found between the mediating variables and aggression. Firstly, a relation was found between SES and aggression, in congruence with the literature (Benbenishty et al., 2000). The etiology of aggression helps to explain this result. The family is the major source of aggression; poor socialization, neglect, patterns of violence and models in the community are all factors affecting the child's level of aggression (Flannery, 1997; Laub & Lauritsen, 1998; Sandhu et al., 2000). However, schools can do very little about this. On the other hand, schools can do a lot to enhance classroom and school climate, which was found to be an important factor in aggression.

The practical implications for school administrators, teachers and school counselors are that more emphasis should be given to the enhancement of a positive classroom climate. Programs of this kind have been effective in enhancing student relationships in the classroom, as well as students' adjustment behavior (Shechtman, 1997).

Secondly, a relation was found between level of aggression and gender, with boys reporting higher levels. Gender is a well known factor related to aggression; boys are often more aggressive than girls (Heusmann & Guerra, 1997; Yogan & Henry, 2000). The explanation for this is both social and psychological: boys are socialized to be strong and repress emotions, the result of which is often aggression (Pollack, 1998).

Finally, fifth graders were found to be more aggressive than sixth graders. This is in contrast to earlier findings suggesting that aggression increases with age, reaching a peak

in adolescence (Kauffman, 1989). The current finding may be related to the type of aggression evidenced in this study, i.e., mainly verbal and mild physical aggression such as cursing and pushing, which may be more typical of younger children.

A few limitations of the study need to be mentioned. First, countries differ in level and types of violence, and results found for the Israeli context do not necessarily apply elsewhere. This study suggests that most aggression in Israeli schools is of a mild form, and the use of weapons is quite rare. Thus, classroom climate may be related more to milder forms of aggression than to extreme physical aggression, such as shooting. Second, classroom climate scores may reflect the school system in the country. Self-contained classrooms may provide more opportunities for close relationships, as evidenced in this study. Third, both measures were self-reports, which may reflect personal tendencies and biases. The use of some objective measures would add strength to the results. Finally, we can only report relationships between variables, but not the direction of the relationship. It is not clear whether a positive climate affects the level of aggression or lower levels of aggression encourage positive relationships. To establish classroom climate as a predictor of the level of violence, a different study design is needed.

Despite these limitations, the study has several strengths: the large study population, the representative sample and the focus on a single age group all add to its validity. Moreover, whether a positive climate reduces milder forms of aggression or lower levels of violence lead to improved relationships, the result is greater student well-being, the leading trend in modern child and adolescent psychology (Bauer, 2000; Myers, 2000; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Thus, we may conclude with a great deal of

confidence that positive relationships in the classroom provide an important tool for dealing with aggression in the school.

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Table 1

Frequencies of Aggression and Teacher Coping (%)

The following items deal with various kinds of violence. They refer to violent situations that you experienced personally in school. Which of the following has happened to you in the past month in your classroom?	Never	Once or Twice	Three or More Times
1. A student grabbed/pushed you on purpose.	42.8	43.6	13.7
2. A student kicked or punched you.	64.1	27.8	8.1
3. You saw a student in the classroom with a gun.	98.7	0.7	0.6
4. A student used a rock or other object to hurt you.	73.0	23.0	4.1
5. You went to the nurse or doctor because a student hurt you in a fight.	86.1	11.8	2.0
6. Students stole your personal belongings or school materials.	54.6	34.1	11.3
7. You saw a student with a knife.	77.5	18.4	4.1
8. A student threatened to hurt or hit you.	56.7	33.8	9.5
9. A student cursed you.	11.0	39.8	49.3
10. A student insulted or humiliated you.	33.6	42.8	23.6
11. A student threatened you with a knife.	96.4	2.9	0.2
12. A group of children in the classroom threatened you.	72.2	20.4	7.4
13. A student forced you to give him/her your food or money.	97.2	2.0	0.8
14. A faculty member insulted or humiliated you.	75.5	20.0	4.4
15. A faculty member pushed or hit you.	89.1	9.0	1.8
16. You brought a weapon to school (knife, pocket knife, gun, etc.).	97.1	2.2	0.7

To what degree do you agree with the following statements?	Not at All	A Little	Some-times	Pretty Much	A Lot
17. I usually feel safe and protected in class.	8.9	13.4	16.6	23.4	37.6
18. Our teacher effectively deals with violent children.	7.7	14.0	23.4	26.6	28.2
19. Our teacher cares that there will not be any violent behavior.	5.3	3.1	4.8	13.6	73.3
20. Our teacher takes action so that there will be less violence.	3.4	4.8	10.6	24.5	56.6

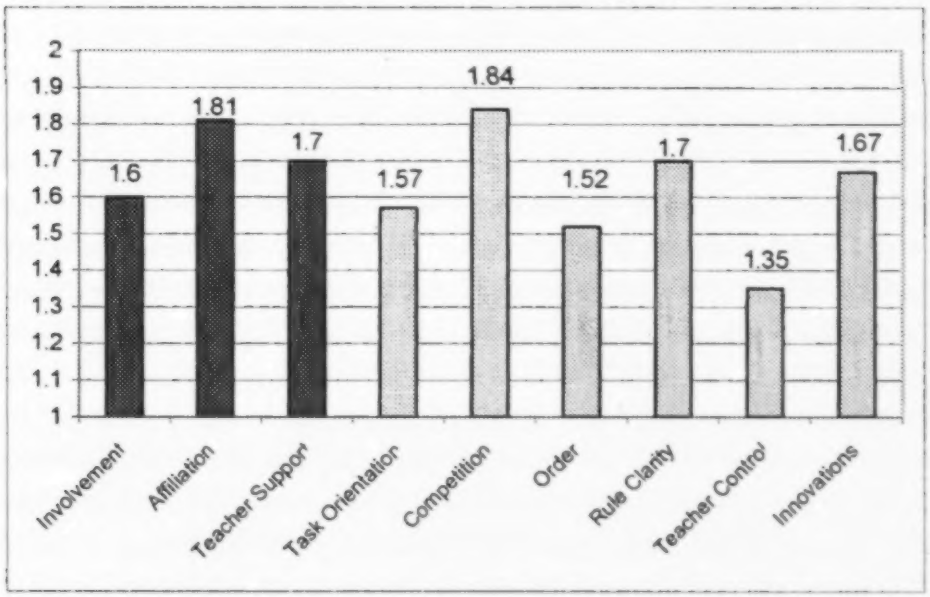

Figure 1: Level of classroom climate (red = Relationships, yellow = Personal Development, blue = System Maintenance)

Table 2

Results of the HLM for Level of Aggression and Teacher Coping, and Dependent Variables

	Coefficient	Standard Error	df	t Ratio
Level of Aggression				
Intercept	2.182743	0.040702	95	53.63***
Relationships	-0.314602	0.016558	9094	-19.00***
Personal Development	-0.087731	0.017221	9094	-5.09***
System Maintenance	-0.030629	0.020073	9094	-1.53
SES	0.000793	0.000188	95	4.22***
Grade Level	-0.027274	0.007446	358	-3.66***
Gender	-0.097754	0.005297	9094	-18.45***
Teacher Coping				
Intercept	-0.190570	0.093496	95	-2.04*
Relationships	1.396815	0.037803	9064	36.95***
Personal Development	0.342488	0.039292	9064	8.72***
System Maintenance	0.479418	0.045797	9064	10.47***
SES	-0.001523	0.000483	95	-3.15**
Grade Level	-0.055549	0.020688	358	-2.69**
Gender	0.104549	0.011998	9064	8.71***

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

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